

# Drought & Poverty in Central Western Queensland 2016 – 2017

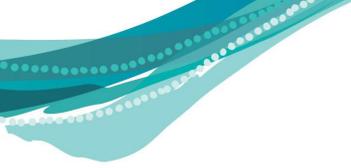
Sandy Paton



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Anti-Poverty Week October 2017



# Introduction

**This is the fourth Drought and Poverty in Central Western Queensland Report, with the first published in 2014. This 2017 Report echoes the themes of previous reports, whilst documenting the current reality of a prolonged drought and the follow on impact for communities.**

Information provided draws on local anecdotal and empirical evidence from people living with drought, support workers and the broader communities; government, industry and media reports and existing research on the impact of drought.

At the time of the release of the 2016 Report, following welcome unseasonal winter rain over some localities, and even though the central west was still part of the more than 80% of Queensland that remained drought declared, there was hope in communities that good follow up summer rain would be enough to break the drought. Unfortunately hope did not become reality for many people. The pain being experienced by drought declared communities in 2014 continues.

The areas covered in previous reports were the Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Banana, Central Highlands, Gladstone, Barcaldine, Barcoo, Blackall-Tambo, Diamantina, Longreach, Winton and parts of Woorabinda. Gladstone's drought declaration was revoked in 2015 and by May 2017 the Central Highlands and Woorabinda were also fortunate enough to have their drought declarations lifted, following summer rain.

In September 2017 there are still six central western shires drought declared, and the Central Highlands Regional Council has called for their community to be drought declared again.



# The Rain that didn't Break the Drought!

**The Bureau of Meteorology notes that a strong negative Indian Ocean Dipole event during 2016 contributed to much of western and southern Queensland recording well above average rainfall, and generating the wettest May to September record for Queensland.**

As the 2016 Drought Report recorded, Longreach, Barcaldine, Isisford and Tambo, all received unseasonal soaking rain, that gave them their highest ever June rainfall totals, since records began in the late 1800s. The Longreach airport recorded 262mm of rain over winter, more than five times its average for the season. There was also substantial rain across some areas extending through until September.

Unfortunately, although this rain lifted people's spirits, and put winter herbage on the ground in many areas, it did not break the drought in central western Queensland. Following a drier than normal "wet" season, 66.27% of Queensland still remains officially drought declared, including the

Central-Western areas of Banana, Barcaldine, Boulia, Blackall-Tambo, Diamantina, Longreach, and Winton.

Boulia is not part of the Regional Development Australia Fitzroy and Central West area, covered in the original Drought and Poverty in Central Western Queensland 2014-2015 report however it is included in this report because as a member of the Remote Area Planning and Development Board (RAPAD) group of councils that cover most of central western Queensland it is involved in, and affected by the collective strategic actions that group of councils takes as drought mitigation measures.

# Further Background

**It is well recognised that the amount and timing of rain in an area, are not the only drivers of crisis in rural areas.**

As indicated in previous Drought and Poverty in Central Western Queensland Reports, there are a range of influences that contribute to the economic susceptibility of primary producers and rural communities when drought strikes. These differentiate them from other businesses experiencing liquidity and viability issues.

The impact on drought declared primary producers, of kangaroo and wild dogs in pest proportions; ongoing demands of livestock management without incoming revenue; the variability of drought cycles; a flow on impact from the ban on live cattle export and the declining value of rural property balanced against debt drawn down in better times have already been well documented, (including in previous “Drought and Poverty in Central Western Queensland Reports”), along with the ensuing vulnerability of rural and regional communities to the impact of drought.

Barcaldine Regional Council, Barcoo Shire Council, Blackall-Tambo Regional Council, Boulia Shire Council, Diamantina Shire Council, Longreach Regional Council and Winton Shire Council are all members of the previously mentioned RAPAD regional organisation of councils. The RAPAD Annual Report 2015 – 2016 notes that the Central

Western area, covered by the group, continues to experience one of its worst droughts since white settlement. It indicates that this drought has had a significant effect on the region and impacted not only the agribusinesses but also the towns’ businesses and communities as a whole. Large areas of Central West agricultural land have been completely destocked, in a few cases for the first time since those properties were established. Several town businesses have seen up to 40-50% decline in turnover, and in some towns, sizable percentages of the population have left in search of employment and other opportunities.

In 2017 drought continues to have a negative financial impact in central western Queensland despite the overall 2015–16 and 2016–17 farm cash incomes of Australian beef-producing farms being estimated to be the highest in over 20 years in real terms. This creates hidden pockets of poverty; mostly in isolated regional and remote areas. Good market prices only benefit those with stock to sell.

The more prolonged the drought, the greater the negative impact on the economic health and social cohesion of whole communities dependant on the viability of the local primary industry.





# Factors Contributing to an Economic Crisis in the Bush

With the aim of continuing to provide a consistent, longitudinal record of the over-all impact of the current drought on Central Western communities, this report will follow the format of the previous three (2014, 2015, 2016). It continues reflection on some of the key factors linked with drought and complicit in the financial downturn in rural and regional areas; and further considers the community's and government responses.

## *Kangaroos*

**Since this drought began in 2014, kangaroos have continuously been cited by a number of sources, as having a negative impact on primary production in droughted areas.**

When monitoring kangaroo numbers in Central Western Queensland, it has continued to be difficult to find current data that is supported by a broad range of stakeholders.

Previous Drought and Poverty in Central Western Queensland Reports (2014, 2015, 2016) provided strong evidence that kangaroo numbers were at that time having a negative impact on grazing production in western areas. In 2015 Queensland Senator Barry O'Sullivan and industry identity Mr John Kelly chief executive of Kangaroo Industry Association of Australia both claimed kangaroo numbers were out of control, despite Departmental data indicating that numbers were decreasing.

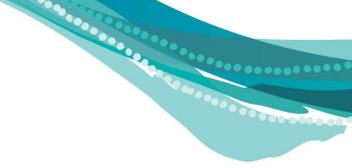
Most recently the Department of Environment and Heritage (DEH) Quota Submissions for Commercially Harvested Macropods in Queensland indicate that "despite the ongoing drought conditions sufficient rainfall has occurred in some parts of the harvest zones over the last 12 months to produce feed for macropods. Whilst overall population estimates in 2016 are less than 2015, a dramatic decline across the entire state has not occurred. The central harvest zone has experienced the greatest decline in macropod numbers for all three commercial species." The DEH submission does acknowledge the potential for macropod densities to decrease dramatically as they did in 2002, if drought conditions continue across the harvest zones.

In June 2017, the organisation "Save The Kangaroo" was indicating on its website that kangaroo numbers "recently dropped by half in most areas of Queensland" citing as evidence a speech by Greens' Senator Lee Rhiannon to the Australian Federal Parliament on February 2014.

Until September there had been minimal media coverage on issues with kangaroos and kangaroo numbers in central western Queensland in 2016-17. Nor was there strong documentation on the impact of kangaroo numbers, from the new dog fencing in many parts of the region.

However, following ABC coverage of concerns raised by kangaroo shooters in the Cunamulla area in September 2017, on the impact of cluster fencing on their industry and kangaroos being "cruelly killed" the issue has generated robust debate across other areas that are using cluster fencing.

Tom King Senior, a Cunnamulla kangaroo shooter, told the ABC that the fences were cutting off kangaroos and emus from food and water. He said he had seen 'roos up against the fences unable to get through and dying from lack of water and food. Mr King also indicated that there had been incidents where amateur shooters brought in to cull kangaroos had dealt with animals inhumanely and where water troughs had been poisoned to kill trapped animals.



Claims of cruelty have been rejected by the Wild Dog Fencing Commissioner Mark O'Brien and State MP for Gregory, Lachlan Millar. Mr. O'Brien believes that there is cost benefit for production from cluster fencing with a further environmental benefit resulting from a reduced number of predators with access to native wildlife.

Mr. Millar also felt that cluster fencing was beneficial for production and communities, increasing the number of sheep graziers can run, and as a flow on effect generating more employment in rural areas.

Both Mr. O'Brien and Mr. Millar stated that where graziers were treating any animals inhumanely, they should be held to account and the matter reported to appropriate authorities. Both men also expressed the view that the kangaroo industry needs support to address a number of market related issues that it is currently experiencing, and that negatively impact on industry viability.

Richard Golden, a south western grazer driven out of goat production by wild dogs told the ABC that he was considering investing in cluster fencing. Mr Golden believes that grazing management practices such as the introduction of artificial waters and introduced fodder species has enabled a population explosion of some native species (especially macropods), way beyond the natural carrying capacity of the land. Expressing a view also frequently heard in western Queensland, Mr Golden indicated that wild dog eradication was essential for property viability however

cluster fencing also provided the opportunity to manage grazing pressure. Anecdotally many graziers are comfortable living with sustainable numbers of kangaroos.

It should not be forgotten that the job of shooting dying kangaroos, in paddocks, on roadsides and bogged in dams and waterholes, also falls to graziers in times of drought. Managing kangaroo populations humanely remains an issue, with the method of control a key factor.

The RSPCA had previously raised concerns about cluster fencing isolating macropod populations from the water sources on which they depend. However the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries advised that: "Macropods are dependent upon free water, but are capable of travelling several kilometres to drink. The actual maximum distance and water requirements vary with species. ... There is rarely more than 5 kilometres separating water points in the semi-arid rangelands of Queensland, which is well within travelling range of red and eastern grey kangaroos. ... Water point closures have reduced kangaroo abundance in areas of Western Australia where stock have been permanently removed, but there are large distances (>20 kilometres) between water points in these areas and the environment is more arid."

Many cluster fences in western Queensland do allow for wildlife corridors, and run inland from and parallel to rivers and watercourses, allowing animals to remain and travel through these areas.

## *Wild Dogs*

**In Queensland, the term 'wild dog' is used to collectively refer to "purebred dingoes, dingo hybrids, and domestic dogs that have escaped or been deliberately released".**

The impact of wild dogs on primary industry in Queensland is well recorded including in all previous Drought and Poverty in Central Western Queensland reports.

Indicators of the size of the problem include the 2013 report by Australian Wool Industry (AWI) Limited that estimated that wild dogs cost the

Australian economy at least \$66.3 million per year and the April 2015 example of a single professional trapper catching 850 dogs on a western Queensland syndicate of eight properties, covering an area of about 150,000 hectares.

Although many methods of eradication have been used including trapping, baiting and shooting, since



the start of this drought there has been a strong drive in central western Queensland to use cluster fencing as a control measure. Initially there was some debate around two approaches: one was the cluster fencing of groups of properties; the other was a multi-shire dog fence enclosing around 8.5 million hectares. The second approach which had industry support was voted down by the majority of shires that comprise the Remote Area Planning and Development Board (RAPAD) and covers the area concerned.

In December 2015 after consensus on a single approach was reached, the Australian and Queensland Ministers for Agriculture announced that RAPAD was a successful applicant for a cluster fencing program through the Queensland Feral Pest Initiative.

### **Wild dogs cost the Australian economy at least \$66.3 million per year.**

In June 2016 RAPAD was allocated \$5.25 million for seventeen cluster fencing projects in the central-west, encompassing more than 1,700km of wild dog fencing. Each cluster in this funding round received on average \$276,833 for 103km of fencing with the 93 properties involved contributing over \$11 million to the fencing projects across the west. Around 1.18 million hectares of land was expected to be protected from wild dogs through this funding round.

In March 2017 RAPAD was able to announce the commencement of the second round of its fencing scheme, which was open only to those who were unsuccessful in the first round. Seven clusters comprising of 31 producers are expected to erect 794 kilometres of fence and protect another 400,000 hectares from wild dogs. This is expected to enable the doubling of sheep numbers in the area.

Scott Counsell, who runs the properties Lyndon and Patricia, totalling 44,500 hectares east of Barcaldine, was one of the successful applicants. A combination of drought and the destruction caused by wild dogs forced Mr Counsell to totally destock in March 2015. Although he had re-introduced some wether lambs in February 2016, wild dogs had mauled over 20% of the flock within four months, making his situation unviable. This

forced the sale of that flock and the consideration of exclusion fencing. At the time he received the RAPAD grant Mr Counsell was running 1,100 head of sheep at Lyndon, but believes that with the fence and better seasons he will be able to build his numbers up to 15,000 head. Mr Counsell told the ABC that whilst not covering the total cost of fencing and construction, the RAPAD funding would help reduce his financial stress.

Of course, not all the applicants that reapplied for round two of RAPAD's scheme were successful, with a few submissions once again missing out. RAPAD Chair Rob Chandler indicated that the board would be seeking to secure more State and Federal Government funding to assist unsuccessful applicants, as well as newcomers who wanted to participate in the scheme.

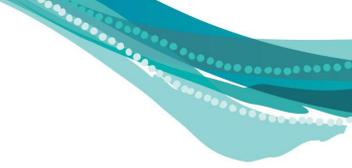
The Queensland Feral Pest Initiative RAPAD cluster fencing round one and two projects were 65 per cent private investment, with the remainder publicly funded, Mr Chandler said.

This is predicated on the maximum grant funding of \$2,700 per kilometre and on average a vermin proof exclusion fence costing approximately \$7,000 per kilometre. Mr Chandler noted that primary producers had committed more than \$17 million dollars to the scheme and said that he was using this as a selling point to continue to lobby for more funds for the RAPAD fencing scheme.

Additionally, rural lobby group AgForce continues to lobby State and Federal Governments for more financial assistance to manage the wild dog problem, seeking further funding toward exclusion fence cluster projects, on-ground control and coordination activities. AgForce has also received government funding to roll out 50 free landholder chemical accreditation and pest management workshops to train 500 landholders across the State, ensuring improved landholder access to the latest toxins and tools to combat wild dogs

On property work may still be required to maintain remaining livestock welfare even as the income earned from the property declines or is non-existent.

Unfortunately there has been little alteration in the necessity for some graziers, now in their fifth year of drought, to choose between the differing



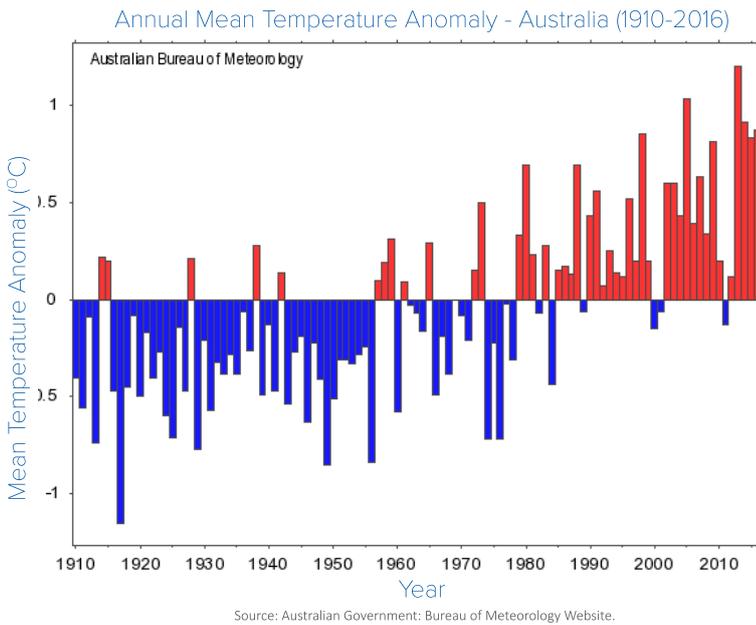
priorities of earning an income and the constant demands of property management and maintaining the wellbeing of any remaining livestock. The obligation of providing ongoing care for animals, that restricts the ability of livestock managers to seek work off property, will continue throughout the drought, whenever a property is still carrying stock. Where properties are managed by couples, one partner may seek off farm earned income, however this can also add to the stress factors already imposed on a relationship by the drought.

## The Variability and Time Frames of Drought

**Since the start of record keeping more than 100 years ago, there is no clear long-term trend in annual or seasonal-mean rainfall in Queensland.**

Following the most recent La Niña that concluded in 2012, rainfall had been generally below average over large parts of Queensland until early 2016 and despite the above average rainfall over large parts of eastern Australia then, the accumulated rainfall deficits over the past four years remained very large.

Wales and the southern third of Queensland. Dry conditions have been aggravated by remarkable warmth across most of Australia in September, succeeding on from the warmest winter mean maximum temperature on record. Maxima for Queensland were the second-warmest on record for the month.



Daytime temperatures are forecast to stay warmer than average for the north-western half of Australia. October to December nights are also expected to be warmer than average over the northern half of Australia, and most of the eastern States.

BOM has suggested that climate influences from the Indian and Pacific oceans will probably be competing, with a weak drying influence from the Indian Ocean, theoretically negating a slightly wet influence from the Pacific Ocean.

However, Professor Roger Stone has also suggested that it is worth

The Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) Climate Outlook Overview for October to December issued on October 4th 2017, shows rainfall during September was below to very much below average over much of Australia. For Queensland it was the tenth-driest September since records commenced in 1900. Rainfall deficiencies have increased in both extent and severity across eastern Australia at the 4- and 7-month timescales, most notably in New South

keeping an eye on current weather patterns. There are currently changes in the patterns in the Pacific Ocean that normally occur in autumn and are now happening in spring, showing some similarities with a La Nina event linked with rain.



## *Impact of Ban on Live Cattle Exports*

**The ongoing effects of the June 2011 ban on live cattle exports to Indonesia are both well recorded and continuing to be felt in western Queensland and northern parts of Australia despite it being six years since the ban was summarily introduced and then lifted a month later.**

In western Queensland drought hit at a time when producers were already overstocked because of the unexpected market closure. Australian live cattle exports fell 42 percent from 521,002 in 2010, the year before the ban, to 278,581 in 2012, the year after. This pushed many producers from one crisis situation to another.

The magnitude of the negative economic impact on cattle producers and their market chain is reflected in the current 2017 class action against the Federal Government seeking \$600 million in compensation. Farmers led by the Northern Territory's Brett Cattle Company, allege the decision to suspend live cattle exports in the interest of animal welfare was "irrational, disproportionate and unjustified".

Cattle prices, which dropped at the time of the ban, have since risen. However those western producers forced to destock by drought have been unable to benefit from a rising market and where able to restock, due to the unseasonal 2016 winter rain, bought in at the top end of the market.

Some western producers being forced to lighten grazing pressure again in May 2017 following very limited follow up summer rain, were able to tap into the export market after the strong wet season in the Northern Territory caused a late start to mustering. In one week Winton-based livestock agent Tom Brodie consigned 144 truck decks of central west cattle- some 90 or so destined for the port of Darwin.

## *Declining Land Values*

**The Valuer-General's 2016 Property Market Movement Report reconfirms its reports from 2014 and 2015. All rural industries are still struggling with the effects of a long-term and widespread drought, restrictive financial policies and increased costs.**

Limited sales have resulted in continued static land values. Many potential purchasers remain cautious, and are likely to continue waiting on improvements in weather patterns and more economic confidence.

In the western pastoral zone, the market peaked around 2008 and then fell back to around 2005–06 value levels. This market has continued to be subdued, with very few sales

transactions until the August 2016 sale of Tunbar, Jericho, after good winter rain. The property had been on the market for 11 years.

The Valuer-General's 2017 Property Market Movement Report did not cover much of the central western area, particularly those most severely effected by drought. However the Report did find that Blackall-Tambo and Barcaldine regional council

areas recorded moderate reductions in urban land values and that many of the smaller towns were still being impacted by the prolonged drought and population drift associated with the need to find work. Barcaldine town was an exception as urban values remain static.

Grazing land values in all Central region local authority areas have seen minor to moderate increases however valuers have indicated that ongoing dry conditions in the western half of Queensland could have a negative impact on the property market in the region.

It should be noted that sales of rural land purchased for the purpose of mining or extractive industries are not used to set the statutory land values of rural land.

## Debt and Asset Ratio – and Looking for a way out

Earlier Drought and Poverty in Central Western Queensland Reports have documented the devastating impact of declining values for both livestock and land to the point where the value of a grazier's assets was less than the value of debt drawn down in better times. Over three-quarters of landholders reported a halving—or worse—of their income and face incomes below the poverty line. Many have had to increase debt just to keep their properties and families going.

### **Over three-quarters of landholders reported a halving—or worse—of their income and face incomes below the poverty line.**

The example of Charlie Phillot, his eviction from his property and his long battle with the ANZ Bank is cited in the 2015 Drought and Poverty in Central Western Queensland Report and was well publicised by social and mainstream media. In August 2015, following a long battle with the bank Charlie's property was returned along with substantial compensation. The story of the fightback and the victory can be found at:

[www.9jumpin.com.au/show/60minutes/videos/4346408065001/](http://www.9jumpin.com.au/show/60minutes/videos/4346408065001/)

However, Charlie was just one of many landholders who have flagged issues with their financial arrangements.

Following a number of public meetings, commencing with "Winton's Last Stand" called by federal MP for Kennedy, Bob Katter, December 2014, and featuring Charlie's story, and a parliamentary committee investigation – a Rural and Debt Taskforce was established by the Queensland Government in October 2015. The Chair was Rob Katter MP for Mt. Isa. The Rural Debt and Drought Taskforce Chairman's Report: "Addressing Debt and Drought Problems in rural Queensland" was released in April 2016.

The Taskforce Report went on to make 14 recommendations that it believed would "stabilise then reinvigorate our primary industries." These Recommendations can be found in "[Addressing Debt and Drought Problems in Rural Queensland](#)"

In February 2017 the Queensland Government committed an additional \$50 million to the Queensland Rural Adjustment Authority (QRAA) to further support primary producers (prawn farmers impacted by white spot disease were also included in this package).

QRAA still offers other financial assistance including Drought Assistance Concessional Loans for refinancing, recovering and preparing for drought. For more information on QRAA's 2016-17 productivity loans visit [www.qraa.qld.gov.au](http://www.qraa.qld.gov.au).

On 1 July 2017 the Farm Business Debt Mediation Act 2017 (Qld) (the Act) replaced the voluntary mediation scheme that was part of the Queensland Farm Finance Strategy. The aim of the Act is to offer an equitable and efficient approach to mortgagees and farmers seeking to resolve issues associated with farm business debts.

Mediation is now required before mortgagees can take possession of a property or undertake any other enforcement action under a farm mortgage arrangement. It is now better understood that farmer's financial problems are more easily managed and addressed if dealt with early. It is further acknowledged that engaging the mortgagee and other advisors or agencies including an Accountant, a Rural Financial Counsellor, Legal Aid and other relevant parties at the first sign of a problem, is more likely to offer a better outcome for everyone.

Where matters continue unresolved, mediation offers a structured negotiation process where the mediator (a neutral and independent person) can help the farmer and the mortgagee work towards reaching an agreement. Mediation is confidential and often cheaper and faster than arbitration or litigation. The Queensland Rural and Industry Development Authority (QRIDA) is responsible for administering the mediation process. More information on the process can be found by contacting QRIDA with any questions on Freecall 1800 623 946 or email [contact\\_fbdm@qrda.qld.gov.au](mailto:contact_fbdm@qrda.qld.gov.au)

# Flow on Effects for Local Small Business

The three preceding Drought and Poverty in Central Western Queensland Reports document in detail, the consequences of drought and reduced primary production on “all the chains surrounding it, whether they are helicopter musterers or livestock transporters or the general store that sells the graziers’ groceries.”

Central western businesses have already experienced a 50 to 60 per cent reduction in turnover, due to the flow on effect of agricultural businesses suffering a drought driven financial downturn: some businesses in Longreach have laid off 30% to 40% of staff, people moved out of the area looking for work, school enrolment numbers dropped and the boarding Hostel for school children closed at the end of the 2015 school year.

The free financial counselling support that was available to businesses in the central western region since early 2016, ended on 30 June 2017. The Small Business and Individuals Financial Counsellor (SBIFC) program delivered through RAPAD and funded by the Central Western Wellness Network assisted non-rural small business owners and individuals, who were experiencing financial

distress. The program built capacity of people to better manage the difficulties of industry change, adjustment and sustainability arising from the current drought and continuing hostile economic circumstances. Although free financial counselling has been available to drought-declared primary producers, SBIFC was thought to be the only free financial counselling service specifically targeted at small business in Queensland. The program assisted around 45 clients across 14 Central West towns.

There is ongoing anecdotal evidence that small businesses in the central west are still suffering financial distress. The Tackling Regional Adversity through Integrated Care scheme research announced in August 2016, will enable a longitudinal survey to identify the financial, social and mental health issues associated with drought. The Western Queensland Drought Committee and the University of Queensland, are undertaking this study to document not only the effect of the drought on producers, but also its consequences for small businesses and those living in the communities of Winton, Birdsville, Boulia Longreach and Windorah, over the long term.

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# Social Impacts of Drought

**In the fifth year of this current drought, the negative social impact of the central western drought is still persistent and ongoing.**

This impact will not end with good rainfall. The more extended a drought, the greater the pressure placed on those experiencing it. Families and communities living with drought continue to deal with un-chosen change, experiencing loss of livelihood, and loss of lifestyle and identity.

People living in the drought impacted areas indicate that, as expected, the social impacts of drought in these areas remain similar to those documented in existing research literature and acknowledged throughout this report.

**As previous Drought and Poverty in Central Western Queensland Reports have documented, for landholders, managers, farm workers and contractors in the region these continue to include:**

- a slide into poverty and in some cases bankruptcy
- capital purchases, and maintenance of equipment and infrastructure being postponed – sometimes with consequences that impact on farm safety
- families faced with decisions about whether to continue to farm – even where the property has been in the family for generations
- limited available finance forcing difficult decisions about prioritising personal and farming expenditure
- an increase in stress and other negative health impacts
- an increasing need for off-farm income
- difficulty in accessing off farm employment
- forced separation, as one partner moves to take up employment elsewhere
- women and children taking on additional work on-farm as outside labour hire is unaffordable
- the daily necessity to feed and water livestock keeping people close to home, restricting opportunity for both outside work and recreational activities

- intergenerational conflict
- marital conflict
- social isolation
- restricted educational access for children- this is not limited to the ability to pay for the travel and fees related to boarding school, university or other education away from home; families have reported not being able to afford to send their children into the in-reach activities associated with Distance Education
- ageing couples remaining on farm and delaying retirement
- drawing down on their “super” to keep animals fed
- an emotional impact on producers who whilst already under stress from the drought are further distressed by the death and injury of livestock caused by wild dogs

**For small business and the community as a whole, social impacts included:**

- population decline especially amongst younger people
- lower levels of community and personal resilience
- reduced access to services
- a decline in social capital reflected in lower social participation
- increased job losses and/or reduction of working hours in small communities affected by drought
- closure of non-essential businesses such as shops selling high end home wares; cafes and restaurants
- businesses staying open but reducing their stock options
- expenditure on business improvements and new equipment being put on hold

- the pool of volunteers in the larger communities being reduced because landholders with limited access to funds for travel need to remain close to home.

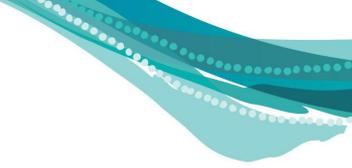
Not for profit services working in the area report that the impacts of the drought now add an additional layer of complexity on already stressful situations for people seeking support around other issues. The two examples below clearly demonstrate the way the stress of dealing with drought further complicates, already stressful family situations.

**John came seeking support due to**

- a major reduction in work in the shearing industry forcing him from the area to find work, leaving his then pregnant partner behind, to hold down some casual work
- He had been drinking regularly after work and playing the pokies and slots online. as a way of dealing with stress
- financial support through Centrelink was not available to him as a New Zealand citizen forcing dependence on the partner;

- financial drought support from some services and agencies was only available to those people who live on a property and not in town
- baby arrived early, forcing John to return and take up casual work and become the sole income provider
- baby and mother had to stay in regional centre, as the baby needed medical treatment; John was only able to visit once a month
- Being back at work has helped John's self worth, and support from his employer and friends and social networks has helped ease financial pressure
- John continues to attend monthly counselling with NGO with a mix of face to face and telephone counselling – subject to phone reception and when John has to come to town.





Jack has a baby son, is separated from his partner and became involved with the service when his ex-partner self-referred. He agreed to seek help for gambling and anger management. Jack gambles at the races, on the pokies and buys lotto tickets but uses these events and activities to socialise and as coping strategies to deal with stress and pressure he is already under.

**These include:**

- Jack is estranged from his brother who shares ownership of the property he manages and that he and his brother both live on
- Jack and his brother only speak to each other when absolutely necessary
- Recently the brother asked Jack to buy him out
- Jack is unable to do this as due to the drought, he has been forced to spend a large amount of money to put in a bore to provide water for the livestock still on the property
- He had to sell cattle to meet the full cost of the bore
- He currently earns a small income from agisting cattle
- Further Jack has a complicated family background, experiencing domestic and family violence as a child growing up, estrangement from some family members and the loss by death of family members he was very close to
- The mother of Jack's baby (whom he planned to marry) did not like living on the property and so they separated
- Jack would like shared care 50/50 of his son but currently has to travel many hundreds of kilometres to see him for a day
- The cost of these trips hurt Jack financially: in this instance NGO service fees have been negotiated to be no or low cost.
- To minimise the cost of travel counselling occurs by phone, and assists Jack to access support and is focussed on assisting him to gamble responsibly and minimise the impact conflict with his partner could have on his relationship with his son.
- Since working with the service Jack has started to address his anger issues, the conflict with his partner has reduced, and she recently permitted an overnight visit for the baby. Jack is also more aware of the way experiences from the past are affecting him and is more thoughtful about the way he responds to others. He has better managed his drinking and gambling and recently attended an intake appointment for mediation. This went well. Jack has been connected to additional support services for his family matters (keeping in mind his financial pressures) and also been made aware that he is eligible to receive help from the Farm Army for free workforce assistance when the weather conditions are suitable.

The stress of the drought can be the straw that breaks the camel's back for many families and may also contribute to the fracturing of communities.





## Assistance Available

**Since 2014 both federal and state governments have provided a range of financial supports to people, organisations and councils being impacted by drought.**

In February 2017 the Federal Government made changes to the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997 enabling primary producers to access income tax averaging 10 income years after choosing to opt out, instead of that choice being permanent. These changes will apply for the 2016-2017 income year onwards, and primary producers who choose to opt back in must first satisfy the conditions for income tax averaging. The Amendments recognise the unpredictable nature of primary industries and are in response to the Federal Government's Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper released in July 2015.

The Queensland Government's 2017-18 Budget allocated funding to protect Queensland's agricultural assets from feral pests, disease and invasive weeds, further develop its export industry, and continue measures focused on curbing farm debt.

### **The package included:**

- extension of existing drought relief arrangements, with up to \$34.6 million in assistance available.
- \$5.2 million over three years to support rural economic development through Growing Queensland's Food Exports, development of a Rural Economies Centre of Excellence and continuation of the One Stop Service.
- \$5.9 million over two years from 2016-17 for the Electric Ant Eradication Program, wild dog fencing through Round 3 of the Queensland Feral Pest Initiative and management of Navua Sedge.

- \$3.4 million over four years for the Queensland Rural and Industry Development Authority to undertake a rural debt survey, operate the Farm Debt Restructure Office, and develop a policy and research function.
- \$30 million over three years to implement management reforms for Queensland fisheries. (An additional two measures focused on fisheries and the management of white spot disease in prawns)

There was also funding allocated for the Tackling Regional Adversity through Integrated Care (TRAIC) program grants. This program is a continuation of the grant funding formerly known as Tackling Adversity in Regional Drought and Disaster Communities through Integrating Health Services. TRAIC grants valued at between \$5000 - \$50000 enable Queensland communities adversely impacted by drought, and other disasters and crises, build community resilience to withstand and recover from adversity.

The 2017-18 Federal Government budget for agriculture, largely focused on delivering and building on, previous commitments made in the Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper and the Developing Northern Australia White Paper.

An extensive list of drought support options, including available government assistance can be found as an Addendum to this Report. Eligibility criteria may apply to some categories of assistance.

# Factors that Limit Access to Support

As documented in previous Drought and Poverty in Central Western Queensland reports and by the media and industry organisations, many farming families experienced difficulty in accessing drought relief funds. Obstacles included: strict eligibility criteria, complex forms, confusing application processes, difficulty submitting applications on-line, the asset value of properties, and long waits for urgent payments. Off farm assets such as a second home to enable children to attend a town school, or superannuation, may also make people ineligible. Initially the bulk of support was targeted at land owners – not employees, contractors or small businesses.

Further, in the first years of this current drought there was also strong anecdotal evidence of people being reluctant to seek Centrelink payments and drought workers reported that many

**“rural families really struggle emotionally with accessing local charities ... as the staff are sometimes their peers and it is a pride thing.”**

In December 2015 news.com reported families across western Queensland reduced to strict, wartime-like food rations to survive, with some depending on charitable organisations for food and necessities.

During that time, Dr David Rimmer, from the Central West Hospital and Health Service told the Courier Mail that he was, “... seeing problems like sores on the body which come both from lack of good nutrition and the stresses that come from dealing with this drought.”

He said that the population in Longreach, was under “immense stress” with business income down 60 per cent and about 40 per cent of the town’s workforce having been laid off.

Further, as the examples cited in the Social Impact section of this Report indicate, many people on droughted properties are finding the cost of travel to central communities to seek support face to face, prohibitive. Where formal counselling and family support or mediation are required, a number are equally reliant on NGO’s waiving or reducing service fees.



# Current Reality

## *Weather*

### **At the end of September 2016 more than 80 per cent of Queensland, including the central west, remained drought declared despite above average winter rainfall and a blanket of green across Central Western Queensland**

By May 2017 declarations had been lifted in 11 shires in northern Queensland. Currently 66.27% of the state, including Central Western Queensland and Banana in Central Queensland remain drought-declared. As previously noted Central Highlands Regional Council is currently applying to be drought declared again.

On the 1st of September 2017 the Bureau of Meteorology's (BOM) analysis of weather data for the previous three months indicated that rainfall was well below average for most of the state and that median daytime temperatures were well above average. BOM predicted that this situation would continue into spring leaving producers with very little, if any, sub-surface soil moisture.

Welcome rainfall across a number of districts in central Queensland in early October 2017 did provide relief for a few lucky producers in the Central Highlands and Banana Shire areas, however the rainfall was very patchy and not considered drought breaking at this point of time.

The Queensland Government's drought policy remains focused on encouraging producers to be self-reliant. Graziers are being encouraged to adopt risk management strategies to reduce the impact of the drought on their properties. Where properties are already struggling owners are advised to seek appropriate assistance. (See Addendum: Drought Support Available)

Currently agricultural enterprises remain vulnerable to the vagaries of the weather, regardless of their own risk management strategies and land management frameworks. Following extreme natural events, including prolonged drought, government intervention may still be required to support agricultural business and their communities, in the future: similar to the support offered to other communities following a natural disaster.



## *The Human Face of Drought and Poverty*

The unseasonal winter rain in 2016 meant that some lucky sheep producers west of Longreach were able to restock, however many were not so fortunate. For others the rain was an indicator that it was time to sell: where there is the need to borrow to restock, a number of producers aren't willing to take the gamble.

In May 2017, the ABC cited AuctionPlus, an online auction platform for agricultural and livestock sales, reporting that 8,100 head of sheep from western Queensland were put through the market in one week, with 4,100 listed on one day. The week before 2,200 head from the region went to auction. Paton Fitzsimons, a Blackall livestock agent, also told the ABC that many graziers had been holding out for predicted rain, but when they missed out, decided to sell. "Those numbers have probably just been sitting there over the last fortnight to three weeks and [there was] no rain, so people have elected to sell coming into the cooler winter months," Mr Fitzsimons said. He added that graziers were typically lightening off, given the lack of summer rainfall.

He further noted that given the current conditions (in May 2017) he believed graziers would continue to sell or move stock out of the region, indicating that the central western area was probably at about 35 to 45 per cent of normal carrying capacity.

A couple of the western graziers who did receive 2016 winter rain was Peter and Elizabeth Clark of Leander, who restocked their barren property with 2,000 sheep despite still being in a drought declaration area, and acknowledging there was the potential that if summer rain didn't come they

would have to resell. Mr Clark said. "Whatever we do is a gamble, I mean being on the land is a gamble." By July 2017 the Clarks had lambs on the ground for the first time in four years however they plan to sell off their wether lambs in spring if there is no decent rain. The property's carrying capacity in good seasons would be around 7,000 merino sheep.

### **Over three-quarters of central western landholders have reported at least a halving of their income, due to the drought.**

Many are experiencing incomes below the poverty line, and may have also taken on more debt to keep their properties and families going.

The Western Queensland Drought Appeal Website continues to paint a stark picture:

*When it does rain, as many as a third of the family farms could be for sale. The reasons will vary but include bank foreclosures, to settle debt or because people will be unwilling to face the stress of another drought. Those that stay on their properties will face 3-5 years of rebuilding their sheep and cattle numbers and getting their businesses back on track, assuming another drought does not intervene first. This also means a slow recovery for the towns and communities of western Queensland.*

The impact of the drought on the land can be clearly seen in a graphic visual display commissioned by CentacareCQ and now available at [Western Queensland Drought Appeal](#).

# Addressing Mental Health in Drought Affected Areas

The 2016 Drought and Poverty in Central Western Queensland Report, noted that research continued to present a mixed perspective on the direct links between the impact of drought and the mental wellbeing of those affected. This was reflected across a number of studies documented in that report. **Briefly these were:**

- The 2015 University of Canberra survey, in Central Queensland and central western New South Wales, that noted 'high levels of psychological distress and low levels of life satisfaction in communities where drought has dragged on or mining jobs have gone.'
- A 2015 study by Natalie Thompson, Priority Research Centre for Gender, Health and Aging, flagging that there was still limited research exploring the relationship between drought specifically (not just rural life) and mental health.
- The 2014 research on "The Impact of Drought on Mental Health in Rural and Regional Australia", Edwards. B. et al, 2014 indicated that the worse the agricultural impact of drought the worse the impact on mental health. Where drought had eliminated or reduced a producer's productivity to the lowest point ever, there were significantly higher rates of mental health problems and lower mental health wellbeing scores compared with those who indicated that the drought had little or no consequence for them.

**Unfortunately even with recent research, the perceptions of the precipitating factors leading to a suicidal event for a rural producer remain varied.**

The 2016 "The health and wellbeing of Australian farmers: a longitudinal cohort study" (Brew. B et al) undertaken in NSW reached the conclusion that remoteness is a key factor in the mental health and wellbeing of farmers, rating it above financial

distress, rural factors and recent adverse events. This study suggested the development of policies and programs that improved the access of farmers to GPs and mental health professionals.

Findings from research titled Pathways to Suicide in Australian Farmers: A Life Chart Analysis (Kundle et al) published in The International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health in April 2017 noted that farmers in Australia have been found to have an increased risk of suicide, and explored the factors behind the figures. In an Australian first, this group of researchers employed the psychological autopsy (PA) method to create life charts.

The research explored the road to suicide of 18 Australian male farmers as a way of understanding the suicidal process and background to suicide in Australian male farmers. **Two routes with differing suicidal triggers were recognized:**

1. "acute situational (romantic relationship problems and financial concerns/pending retirement) and protracted (long-term psychiatric disorder)."
2. "Long working hours, interpersonal conflicts, physical illnesses and pain, alcohol abuse, access to firearms, and exposure to drought were additional common factors identified."

These researchers noted that an appreciation of the interconnectedness between the principal trigger and other interconnected but less important risk factors on the suicidal road in the wider environmental context for male farmers is required when developing and implementing rural suicide prevention activities.

This study found that most farmers had not had an earlier experience of suicide and did not talk about their intentions. Instead it found that the trigger was usually acute, (with the exceptions being farmers who were already dealing with clinical mental health issues). The research identified two significant risk factors: the breakdown of relationships for middle aged men, and financial

problems for older men nearing retirement. Researchers supported Joiner's Interpersonal Psychological Theory of Suicidal Behaviour that proposes that there are a number of interlinking elements that need to be considered in order to predict and prevent suicide.

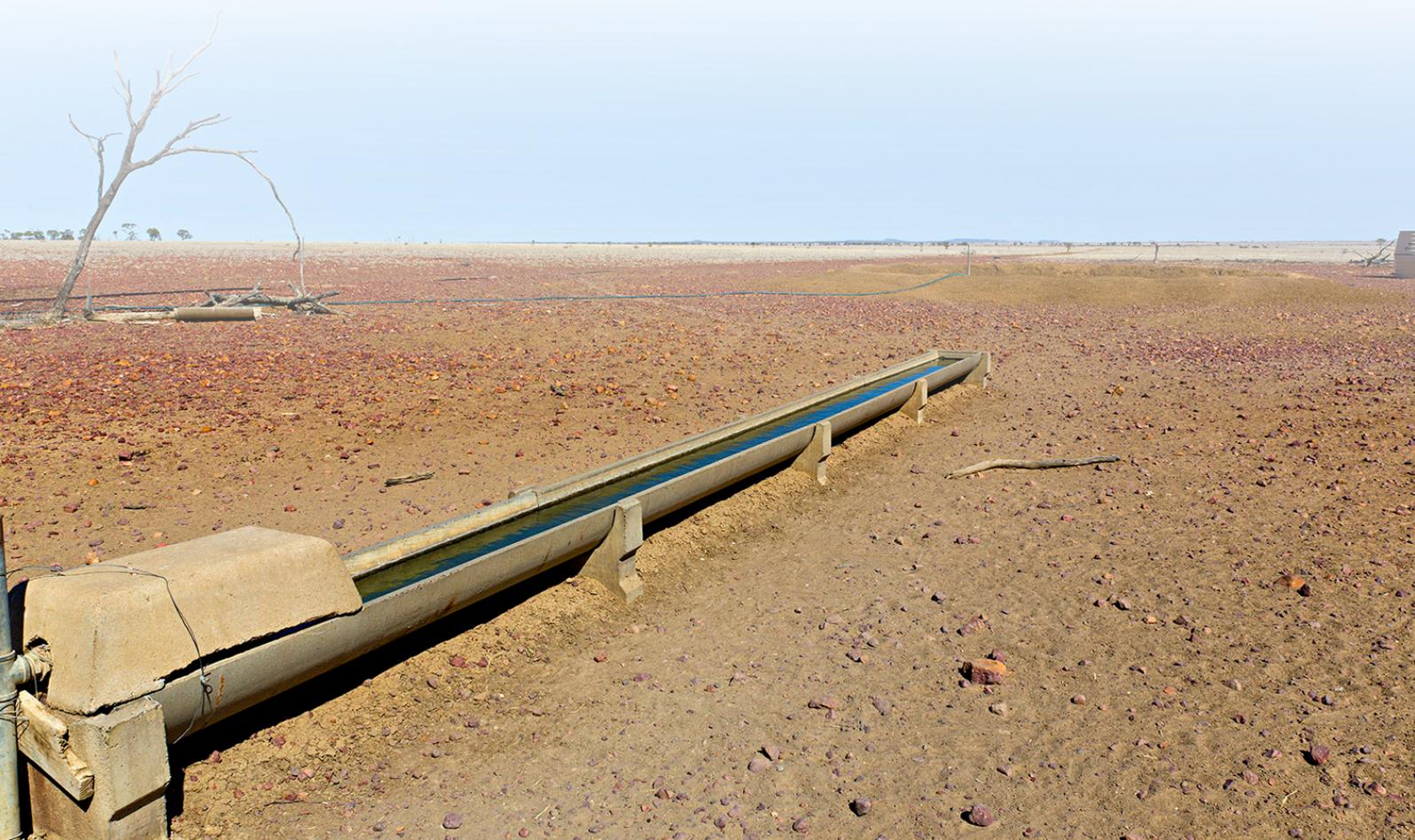
In one proactive approach to addressing mental health issues in the drought stressed Central Highlands, CentacareCQ, the Central Highlands Regional Council and CQ Rural Health, are working together and focusing on the establishment of the Central Highlands Mental Health and Wellbeing Hubs centred around providing community access to the Wheel of Wellbeing (WoW) framework. This framework is centred around six key themes of individual mental health and wellbeing: Body, Mind, Spirit, People, Place and Planet. The approach is underpinned by positive psychology and supported by research that indicates specific practices in day-to-day living increase personal wellbeing and resilience.

People undertaking the training not only benefit personally, they spread and promote WoW approach through their families, their work

places and their broader community. The Central Highlands is one of three sites being funded through the Queensland Mental Health Commission.

The Queensland Health website [www.qld.gov.au/health/mental-health/rural](http://www.qld.gov.au/health/mental-health/rural) provides mental health information and links to support specifically for rural and remote communities. Queensland Health also currently funds the Tackling Regional Adversity through Integrated Care (TRAIC)\* program, grants valued between \$5000 - \$50000 available each year to enable Queensland communities affected by adversity associated with drought, disaster and other crises to build community resilience, in other words the sustained ability of a community to withstand and recover from adversity.

From July 2016 PHN's have been funded to deliver a range of medical and allied mental health services to communities and Queensland Health is providing primary mental health support to drought-affected areas through the Royal Flying Doctor Service. For more information on what the PHNs can provide please go to [www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/PHN-Mental\\_Tools](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/PHN-Mental_Tools)



# Ways Forward

## Government Support

As already mentioned, the Queensland and Australian Government continue to provide a number of drought support programs across the central west. Much of the 2017 support is built on strategic investment approaches, announced earlier, in the drought.

The Federal Government's strategies are found in The Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper released in July 2015. This Paper identified drought as the major challenge for producers, as it has a substantial impact on 'agricultural

output, productivity and farm incomes.

**Under 'Priority 3: Strengthening our approach to drought and risk management' government set aside funding under two key strategy areas:**

- Preparing for drought
- In drought support'

It remains essential that state and federal Governments continue to take an holistic approach to supporting industries and communities survive drought events, and build resilience.

## Sustaining Existing Community Resources and Investing Cash into Rural Communities

As the drought drags on, there are increasing moves by support groups and not-for-profit organisations to provide support directly through cash or debit/gift cards, rather than distribute goods that could be purchased within the communities themselves. The cash approach provides a beneficial flow-on impact for the local small businesses that spreads throughout the community, and helps maintain employment and slows the drift of people forced to seek work elsewhere.

When families move, school numbers drop, impacting on the number of teachers and support staff employed. For example: Longreach Primary School numbers have dropped by a third, meaning fewer teachers were required, again reducing services and business activity in the town.

The Queensland Country Women's Association (CWA) have lead by example through their long running Public Rural Crisis Fund, and have consistently advocated for support for distressed communities to be provided by grocery store gift vouchers, store credit, or payment of accounts.

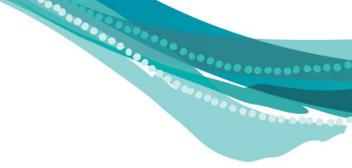
The Western Drought Appeal Website also requests cash noting: that the money can be "pre-loaded onto prepaid gift cards which are then posted to local grazing families who spend the funds in our local communities. This method gives struggling small businesses a boost in trade and allows your hard earned donation to keep cycling around our towns."

Many church and charity groups have now also adopted the cash/card approach to support.

The Buy a Bale group takes a multi-pronged approach, by providing stockfeed, money and volunteers to farmers and rural communities across Australia. Some hay is purchased, some donated; some truckies donated their time and fuel and some is paid for. The Farmers' Card funded by donations provides cash directly into the rural communities and the supply of stockfeed saves graziers cash that they can continue to spend on other items. Buy a Bale aims to help not just producers but also their communities. Anywhere people retain stock, fodder is always welcome.

In September 2015 Buy a Bale announced the launch of its Farm Army website ([www.FarmArmy.com.au](http://www.FarmArmy.com.au)). Producers can list jobs they need doing and volunteers can apply for a job directly. People can register to volunteer and receive notification of farmers requiring help. This helps address a need brought about both by the lack of cash and the loss of trades' people from communities. Jobs can include fencing, cleaning up debris, ploughing, or any other tasks required. The Farm Army now has more than 4400 volunteers registered to help out in rural communities (not just droughted areas).

A new approach to sustaining existing community resources is being demonstrated by the organisation



Aussie Helpers who in July 2017 agreed to take over the role of the VISE volunteer relief teacher scheme. The program that links retired teachers with families in rural areas to give home tutors, usually mothers, or governesses, up to six weeks off, was due to close in December 2017. Brian Egan, Aussie Helpers' founder told Country Life his organisation was "shifting its emphasis from feeding cows to helping people's mental health and this fitted in well." Frequently the partners of the teachers accompany them and will also help out on the property.

The original VISE scheme was a purely volunteer program, at every level, and was being forced to close because it had been unable to fill its Chief Executive role for more than three years. Due to generous private contributions Aussie Helpers has been able to pledge \$100,000. The funds will be used to reimburse the travel costs of the volunteer teachers who come from across Australia, and a new website hosted by Aussie Helpers. The "new" service called Aussie Helpers Volunteers for Isolated Students' Education (ASVISE), would follow similar lines to VISE. People interested in supporting rural families through ASVISE can register to be a Tutor, Angel or Internet Trainer at [aussiehelpers.org.au/ahvise/](http://aussiehelpers.org.au/ahvise/)

## *Be Prepared*

**The recognition that primary producers, business stakeholders and rural communities will always need to be prepared for the next drought, is a constant in any forward planning for regional Australia, and is essential in moving communities out of a cycle of drought poverty.**

Given the historic documentation of drought and its impact on Australian communities and rural industries since settlement it is essential that when planning for the future we consider both the micro and macro levels, with government, industry, producers, small business and local government working together.

Much of the government funding currently targeting drought, encourages and supports drought preparation as well as providing assistance to people already affected.

The Queensland Government's Business and Industry Portal continues to host a

Eligible schools and families will be contacted between now and the start of the school year in 2018 to ensure a smooth transition process.

Tourism continues to provide an essential cash flow into central western Queensland and a driver of jobs and local economies. The Queensland Government has allocated \$6 million for improving transport and road access in Western Queensland. The government funding for the projects involved will be met with a 50/50 funding contribution from the respective Local Government Area (LGA).

Some rural landholders such as the Kinnon and Walker families from Longreach, have also tapped directly into the tourism market, as a source of income. For droughted grazier Richard Kinnon from "Nogo Station" his diversification into a number of tourism ventures, has helped provide another income stream. Mr Kinnon is also an enthusiastic advocate for Longreach's developing pastoral tourism as properties such as Camden Park outside Longreach welcomes visitors keen to see the grazing industry first hand. Camden Park owner, Dan Walker told the Courier Mail that the "grazing industry has a special appeal for the Queensland tourist."

[Planning for Drought Page](#) to assist producers. The site also provides links to current support available.

The industry body Agforce also has up-to-date planning and support information available on [www.agforceqld.org.au/index.php?page\\_id=34](http://www.agforceqld.org.au/index.php?page_id=34)

The need for producers, businesses and the broader community to be better prepared financially, physically and mentally to cope with inevitable drought events continues. However it should be acknowledged that in extreme events additional assistance may be required.



## Build Resilience

As has been already discussed, for rural communities and industries to thrive into the future they need a resilience that is more complicated than the capacity to “bounce back” from a negative experience. Real resilience requires the abilities to think positively, anticipate and plan for the future, respond proactively, seek out opportunities and undertake actions that will make a meaningful change.

The University of Queensland 2008 Stanthorpe Study, identified 11 Resilience Concepts, featuring them in the “Building Resilience in Rural Communities” Toolkit. Although not specifically targeted at communities in crisis, many of the concepts identified such as: Social Networks and Support; Positive Outlook; Learning; Infrastructure and Support Services; Sense of Purpose; Diverse and Innovative Economy; Embracing Differences; Beliefs and Leadership, also better enable communities to survive a drought crisis

### **Previous research has shown that community events are an effective approach to providing social networks and support.**

During the current drought, service providers identified that providing support at community events, was an effective approach for supporting a person’s sense of wellbeing. The social interaction and coming together as a community was found to be really beneficial for those involved.

Backbone organisations that already exist in communities, for example churches, agricultural organisations, QCWA, arts groups, sporting organisations, etc. should continue to be encouraged and resourced to support a regular calendar of interactive local events that are consistently available; enabling meaningful connections and relationships to be established and be available during drought times.

Reducing the impact of drought requires actions to be taken during the drought to best support those negatively impacted and help retain existing resources, and forward planning and mitigation strategies prior to the next event. Activities that increase the capacity of both professionals and

the community to identify and support those experiencing mental health challenges is probably best delivered into communities, prior to drought or major stress events.

Tambo is a community that is looking to build its own resilience through diversification. With financial support from both federal and state governments, the council has invested in restoring an abandoned sawmill. With the help of a new lessee it will support the phoenixing of this industry, to help offset the reduced employment and spending during drought or an agricultural downturn. The milling industry will draw on timber from existing state forestry reserves in the area. The council expects that by the end of the 25 year timber licence there will have been a return of more than \$100 million to the district. Blackall-Tambo Regional Council Mayor Andrew Martin believes the mill will bring in a million dollars a year to the Tambo region alone, attract new employees to the town and bring flow-on economic benefits. He expects there to be: “... an extra 20 employees, plus 20 wives plus 2.3 children for each family. You’re looking at another teacher, and another teacher’s aide”. “It takes the troughs out of the bad time and adds to the peaks in the good times”, Cr Martin told the ABC.

Also recognising the need for diversity in an area shaped by its geographic isolation and limited economic opportunities, the RAPAD group of councils have acknowledged the necessity of being able to engage in the digital economy if they want to attract and retain people within their communities. In June 2016 the Board endorsed the development of a regional digital strategy.

In February 2016, the University of Southern Queensland’s Institute for Resilient Regions conducted a series of regional workshops to ascertain the community’s views on the longer term future for the region, the opportunities for sustainable development and ways of building resilience in the RAPAD footprint. In October & November 2016, RAPAD contracted Glentworth Consulting to conduct additional extensive community consultation focussed on the digital aspiration of the region and produce the Smart Central West Digital Strategy.

This Strategy is a pragmatic approach to enabling the RAPAD councils to build on the region's strengths, mitigate weaknesses, maximise opportunities, and circumvent the threats.

The Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal (FRRR) through its program called Tackling Tough Times Together (TTTT) continues to make funds available to support drought affected communities in NSW and Queensland to access the resources

they need to support one another through drought. Funding supports community based activities that help to relieve current stressors and symptoms, and build capacity and resilience for the future.

More information can be found at: [www.frrr.org.au/cb\\_pages/tackling\\_tough\\_times\\_together.php](http://www.frrr.org.au/cb_pages/tackling_tough_times_together.php)

## *Industry Leadership – Leadership now comes in Different Guises*

### **Forums have been pivotal in shaping government, industry and community approaches to more effectively supporting those currently experiencing drought, and developing long term drought impact minimisation strategies.**

Over the five year period of this drought, industry leaders have participated in a number of drought focused Community Forums. **The Forums conducted in this time have included:**

- The CEO Outback Business 'Renewal' Summit held in Longreach in August 2014.
- The December 2014 'Last stand at Winton', was organised by Federal MP Bob Katter and his son, State MP Rob Katter
- "Getting a Grip on Drought Forum" in Longreach in May 2015
- The August 2015 "Debt Crisis Summit" in Charters Towers which although outside the central west was a direct follow up on the Winton meeting and was initiated by Rob and Bob Katter, in conjunction with Katter's Australia Party MP, Shane Knuth,
- On the 1st September 2015 Premier Palaszczuk also visited Charters Towers to listen to the concerns of local people.
- The Sunday Mail Bush Forum held in Longreach on September 26th – 2015
- The 2nd CEO Outback Business Summit, Parliament House, Brisbane, November 2015
- The Agforce 'Managing Risks: Securing the Future' forum at the Charleville Racecourse on July 27 2017, aimed to provide social

support to farming families as well as tips and tools to improve their business and revitalise their health.

As more extensively documented in the 2016 Drought and Poverty in Central Western Queensland Report, in October 2015 the Queensland Government established an independent Rural Debt and Drought Taskforce, to examine debt issues. In an interactive consultation process, completed by January 2016, the Taskforce conducted 14 regional meetings and received submissions from primary producers, financial services providers, stakeholder organisations, and rural and regional leaders.

Concurrently, in November 2015 Queensland Treasurer Curtis Pitt convened a State Government rural debt banking roundtable attended by senior executives from Australia's major banks, the Australian Bankers' Association, the Queensland Rural Adjustment Authority (QRAA) and Queensland Treasury Corporation. Following this Roundtable, Mr Pitt said he was heartened by the willingness of government, banks and the agricultural sector to work together on policy solutions.

As previously noted, in May 2016 The Drought and Debt Taskforce released its "[Addressing Debt and Drought Problems in Rural Queensland](#)" Report with 14 Recommendations.



In the 'Chair's foreword' of this report, MP Rob Katter noted: “ .. we believe that with the right mechanisms, as outlined in our report we can allow farming industries to recover and prosper in the good times.”

The first step forward was introduction of the Farm Debt Mediation Bill to parliament in August 2016 with the [Farm Business Debt Mediation Act 2017\(Qld\)](#) being legislated on 30 March 2017. **The new Act renamed the Queensland Rural Adjustment Authority (QRAA) to the Queensland Rural and Industry Development Authority (QRIDA) on 1 July 2017, and expanded its range of functions to include:**

- Oversight and accreditation of the mediators for the compulsory Farm Business Debt Mediation program offering an equitable resolution of farm debt disputes. To ensure the integrity of this new role the program is managed by a separate Business unit within QRIDA
- Expansion of policy and research functions with a focus on farm finance matters
- Undertake rural debt surveys in Queensland commencing with the period January 2012 to December 2017
- Creation of an office within the Authority called the Farm Business Debt Restructure Office, with specific functions yet to be determined.



The 'renewal summit' held in Longreach in August 2014, also generated its own follow on summit in Brisbane in 2015 and further highlighted the Kidworth Station case study as a practical planning tool for beef producers. The approach provides participants with the opportunity to identify ways of changing the operating environment of the imaginary Kidworth Station, which has been experiencing the difficulties of drought, depressed stock prices, debt, lower land values and destocking, over the past seven years. They are then asked to review Kidworth's financial downturn and scrutinise its business strategy enabling it to move into a positive operating environment.

The methodology provides a platform for developing practical, real life solutions for rural businesses and opens the discussion on how business can recapitalise after drought. In 2015 Longreach grazier James Walker, one of the contributors to the Kidworth concept advised the Rural Press Club that: "On average a farm will need in excess of \$1million to \$1.5million to restock when it rains so in our region we have around 600 properties – so where will the capital come from – and where will the cows be found?" Further noting that all those in the industry needed to be "identifying, discussing and developing new levels of thinking."

In 2016, building on the work already undertaken in developing Kidworth, Mr Walker and his company Agrihive, with support from MLA, ABARES, the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the federal Agriculture Department started trialling a user friendly, time efficient financial farm business app "Farmecco" that assists beef producers make more informed financial choices. Formally launched in May 2017 "Farmecco" enables users to explore all aspects of a beef business and assess the impact of decision making on farm viability and family

## Hope

Unfortunately the green shoots of hope that emerged after the unseasonal 2016 winter rain have largely withered with the lack of a good summer wet season across most of the central west.

Hope now rides on the flow on effect of legislative changes that support producers, changes in land management practices, and the coming "wet" season.

lifestyle: i.e. "can we destock now, and still send kids to private school next year".

Industry leadership and tools that encourage a strategic and pro-active approach to both property management and family and farm finances are pivotal in increasing the resilience of primary industry.

The Executive Committee of the Western Drought Appeal have also displayed leadership and connection to community through their driving of the Appeal over the last four years. David Phelps, Jenny Coombes, Bill Ringrose and Ingrid Miller have been responsible for drawing the plight of their communities to public attention: providing accurate information, highlighting the real need for financial support for their area, and assisting in the coordination of distribution of aid and resources to suitable people and in an appropriate and respectful manner.

With the future in mind, Vision 21 the alumni of the Queensland Building Rural Leaders (BRL) program that encouraged and supported rural leadership for nearly twenty years, in 2016, partnered with people in the central west and the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal (FRRR) in a considered approach to developing new community leadership through the Leading in the Central West program. The group's vision is that "by 2019, a significant and growing network of people in the Central West region will have shared knowledge, skills, aspirations and relationships to work together effectively and to wisely lead themselves and others to achieve the things that really matter to them and their community/ies."

**Strong local leadership in all its forms continues to be a key factor in the resilience of communities.**

# Conclusion

The distress and poverty caused by drought continues to be a major issue for Central Western Queensland despite the unseasonal 2016 winter rain. The very poor summer rainfall has ensured that region remains drought declared, with no likelihood of the declarations being lifted in the short term. The 2016 hopes for a better season have been dashed.

As noted in previous Drought and Poverty in Central Western Queensland Reports, the longer the drought continues, the greater the emotional and financial pressure it imposes on people in affected areas where even the most resilient are tested.

The factors that mitigate the impact of drought continue to remain consistent, regardless of the length of the drought itself. **These are:**

- being well prepared for the inevitable
- building resilience in people and communities
- learning from past and current experiences
- state and federal government support that is timely, strategic and accessible
- approaches that encourage people to come together and build social networks of support
- sustaining existing resources in the community
- leadership, industry and otherwise
- diversification

However, even as the drought rolls on communities are fighting back. People are finding ways to cope with difficult situations, and are also planning ways of reducing the impact of future droughts. They are learning from past and current experiences and as we can see in this report, they are finding ways to diversify their properties and their communities.

There has also been a growing awareness of the need to listen to the local voice and find appropriate and efficient ways of supporting communities through cash, expertise and fodder.

Currently Australian and Queensland governments are still providing a range of supports in drought declared areas and the long term survival of both producers and their communities continues to depend on this support for the present.

Unfortunately anecdotal evidence still shows that some people are finding it difficult to access the support they need: both financial and professional.

Further, there is still the reminder that when the rains come, financial recovery will take several years. Many producers will need to restock, and some will be dependent on banks for favourable refinancing at a time when the banks themselves are presented with an opportunity to foreclose and sell properties.

In 2017 drought and poverty continues to be a problem for much of central western Queensland.



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<https://www.savethekangaroo.com/factsheet>

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*Western Queensland Drought Appeal*

<http://www.wqda.org.au/>



# Addendum

## **DROUGHT SUPPORT AVAILABLE**

There are a number of assistance programs available to landholders and those being impacted by drought. Eligibility criteria may apply to some categories of assistance.

The Queensland Government Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF) website [www.daf.qld.gov.au/environment/drought/assistance-programs](http://www.daf.qld.gov.au/environment/drought/assistance-programs) provides broad descriptions of

government drought assistance programs available to Queensland producers.

Check the [eligibility requirements for drought financial assistance](#) and access the [funding guidelines and application forms](#).

Read the latest information about [which areas are currently drought declared](#).

## **Queensland Government Drought Assistance**

In 2013, at the start of the current drought, the Queensland Government announced a package of drought assistance programs that adopted a whole-of-government approach. The government has

committed to maintaining these programs until 2018. Full information on the measures currently available can be found at [DAF.QLD. Drought Assistance Programmes](#) and a summary is provided below.

### **Drought Relief Assistance Scheme**

The Drought Relief Assistance Scheme (DRAS) provides 5 assistance measures.

#### **Drought-declared properties may be eligible for:**

- freight subsidies for transporting fodder
- freight subsidies for transporting water
- the EWIR (Emergency Water Infrastructure Rebate), which provides a rebate on the purchase and installation of water infrastructure purchased for animal welfare needs. (EWIR addresses immediate animal welfare needs,

helps improve properties to be more drought resilient, and generally lifts productivity by providing water supply to areas where pasture was less than fully utilised.)

#### **Properties that have had their drought declaration revoked may be eligible for:**

- freight subsidies for transporting livestock returning from agistment
- freight subsidies for transporting livestock purchased for restocking.

## **Additional Rural Financial Counsellors**

The Queensland Government has also contributed additional funding to the Australian Government's Rural Financial Counselling Service (RFCS) in some areas, and has delivered extension workshops on drought management.

## **Community Assistance Package**

### **The Queensland Government is providing**

- community support to help people under stress
- assistance for organising community events
- training and resources for community leaders.

## **Mental Health Problems**

Queensland Health is providing primary mental health support to drought-affected areas through the Royal Flying Doctor Service.

## Electricity Charges Relief for Water Supply

The Department of Energy and Water Supply operates the Drought Relief from Electricity Charges Scheme (DRECS) which provides relief from fixed charges for accounts that use electricity to pump water for farm or irrigation purposes

during periods of very low or no water availability. For the majority of customers in the Ergon Region, DRECS is delivered by Ergon Energy Queensland, which is reimbursed by the government via monthly community service obligation payments.

## Transport Concessions

**Drought assistance measures provided by the Department of Transport and Main Roads include:**

- permits for increasing the maximum hay loading height
- concessions on shifting droughted livestock
- waivers and greater flexibility on certain vehicle registration conditions and fees and charges
- increased school transport allowances for some families that drive their children to school or connect with a school bus run.

## Wild Dog and Feral Cat Destruction Initiative

DAF has allocated \$4 million to support wild dog projects in drought-affected areas and \$1 million for feral cat research that will support future programs in national parks and key private conservation reserves that are heavily affected by feral cat predation.

Read more about [feral pest initiatives in Queensland](#).

## Climate Information

The Queensland Government's [Long Paddock website](#) provides climate information, including seasonal climate outlooks, rainfall and pasture growth, and a drought conditions update.

# Australian Government Drought Assistance

The Australian Government's Department of Agriculture and Water Resources [Agriculture, Farming & Food webpage](#) is a one stop shop for primary producers seeking Drought Support.

In recent years, the Australian, state and territory governments have been working together to reform drought policy to ensure primary producers are assisted to be better prepared for drought, as well as providing drought support where required. To find out more about the process of drought management reform please click on [drought policy page](#).

In July 2015 the Australian Government announced the [Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper](#), which further developed the reform process and the assistance already available. These measures

cover a number of activities including concessional loans, taxation measures, enhanced social support and local community infrastructure projects. Many of these White Paper initiatives will assist producers to not only manage drought, but also address a range of other production and business risks they face.

The measures are being provided through a range of government agencies including the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources, the Department of Human Services, the Department of Social Services, and the Australian Taxation Office. Some programmes are also being delivered by state and territory governments. Contact details for these organisations can be found by clicking on the Drought Assistance [Contacts page](#).

See more information about Australian Government drought support, including the measures announced in the White Paper by clicking on [Assistance Measures](#) or the [Agricultural Competitiveness White Paper website](#).

A summary of these support measures is also available in the [Drought and Rural Support Factsheet](#).

## **Additional Support Available**

### **Churches, Services and Volunteer Groups**

Funds from church and religious organisations and service and volunteer groups with both broad outreaching networks and a strong local presence in many towns, have been channelled into support for communities (not just for those affiliated with these organisations). Hay deliveries, gift cards and gift parcels of food and toiletries are amongst the distribution processes.

Industry bodies such as Agforce, Future Beef and National Farmers' Federation have information on drought support available on their websites.

#### **Agforce**

[www.agforceqld.org.au/index.php?page\\_id=34](http://www.agforceqld.org.au/index.php?page_id=34)

#### **NFF**

[www.nff.org.au/read/4417/nff-drought-relief-package.html](http://www.nff.org.au/read/4417/nff-drought-relief-package.html)

#### **FutureBeef**

[futurebeef.com.au/knowledge-centre/drought/](http://futurebeef.com.au/knowledge-centre/drought/)

### **CWA Public Rural Crisis Fund**

The fund was established to help women and their families in crisis, whether from natural disaster or personal crisis. One hundred per cent of every donation goes directly to helping the recipients recover, rebuild and get ahead. A donation also sends a very important message that someone cares. Practical assistance is given in the form of grocery store gift vouchers, store credit or payment of accounts. No cash payments are made. By helping in this way, not

only is the recipient assisted but the money stays in the local community. Every little bit helps, with donations over \$2 tax deductible. To make a donation, [click here](#).

If you urgently need financial assistance, [please complete this form](#).

**As well as access to local and face to face services, additional ongoing support for families can be found by contacting the following organisations:**

- Rural Mental Health Support Line 1800 201 123
- Lifeline : 13 11 14
- Kids Help Line 1800 55 1800 or [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)
- Beyondblue 1300 22 4636 or [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

### **Drought Angels**

Drought Angels is a project of The Chinchilla Family support centre a not for profit organisation. 100% of funds raised and donated go to helping farmers and rural communities.

[www.facebook.com/519529671494691/photos/a.519554668158858.1073741827.519529671494691/755819367865719/?type=1&theater](https://www.facebook.com/519529671494691/photos/a.519554668158858.1073741827.519529671494691/755819367865719/?type=1&theater)

### **Aussie Helpers supports farmers.**

[www.aussiehelpers.org.au/about/](http://www.aussiehelpers.org.au/about/)

CALL US: [1300 665 232](tel:1300665232)

# Support to Build Resilience

## *Foundations for Rural and Regional Renewal*

Priority is given to organisations run by, and based in the regions over those delivering services to, but not based in the listed regions. Projects led by local communities are also given preference.

### **The Objectives of the program are to:**

- Enhance the mental health and wellbeing of drought-stressed rural and remote communities
- Reduce social isolation by facilitating strong social cohesion and connection
- Build community capacity to cope now and in future droughts

Grants of up to \$10,000 are available across most of Queensland. A small number of grants valued at up to \$50,000 are also available for larger-scale projects that have a broader impact.

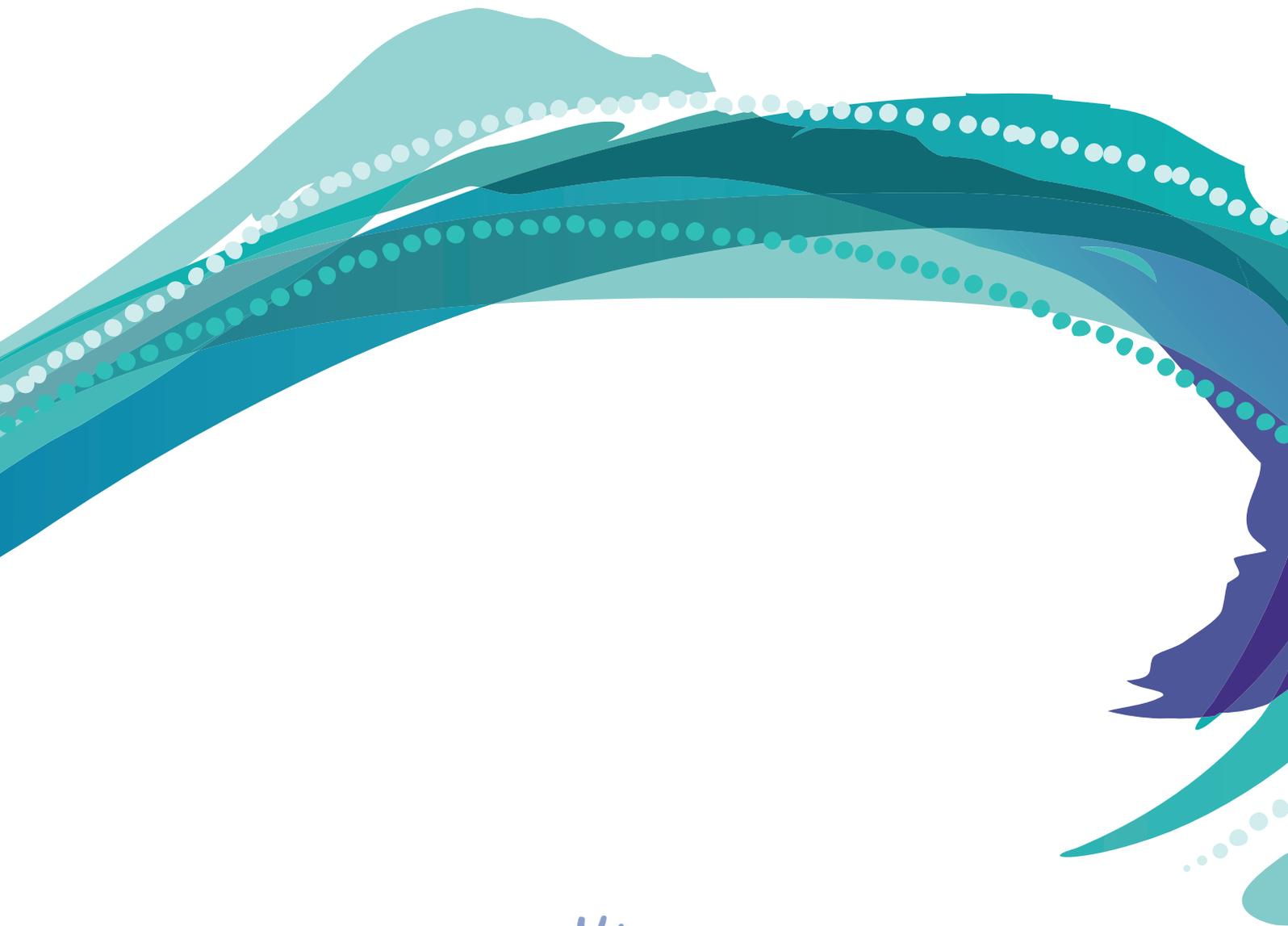
Funding is to enable community based activities that both help to relieve current stressors and symptoms, but most importantly, build capacity and resilience for the future. They may also be used to support activities that engage people in being active, exploring options and creating something that will stand the test of tough times.

The Queensland component of the program is funded by the Tim Fairfax Family Foundation.

## *The Resilience Institute*

The Resilience Institute provides consulting, assessment and training to assist individuals and organisations develop resilience. [resiliencei.com/](http://resiliencei.com/)





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**Administration Office**  
16 Bolsover St  
PO Box 819  
Rockhampton Q 4700  
E [admin@centacarecq.com](mailto:admin@centacarecq.com)